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ABSTRACT

The Triad process, a structured form of small-group discussion, has been used in teaching freshman composition. After reading each other's first drafts, students separate into groups of three; in each group, students take the role of reader, writer, or observer. Using role descriptions provided by the teacher, the readers analyze the writers' papers, indicating strengths and weaknesses; the writers use the readers as a resource for obtaining useful information on ways of revising their papers; and the observers observe reader/writer interactions and present feedback on their observations. Roles are then rotated so that each student has a chance to act in all three. Using information they have gained, students rewrite their papers at home for submission to the teacher. An analysis of audiotapes of the interactions of Triad groups and the interactions of groups of three students who were not assigned roles indicated that the Triad groups exhibited more specifically appropriate behavior than the other groups and that Triad members successfully assumed the roles of reader and writer, improving with each session. The performance of observers revealed a need for instruction in process observation (not done in the study). The majority of students found the group discussions useful and enjoyable. (GW)

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SMALL GROUP TRIAD:

AN INSTRUCTIONAL MODE FOR THE TEACHING OF WRITING

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The need for improved writing skills of students at the secondary level has been evidenced by reported scores on national tests. One approach to improvement of writing skills involves a technique utilizing the dynamics of small group processes. For three years, this writer implemented various small group activities in her general composition classes at the University of Pittsburgh. Students exchanged papers and discussed anonymous papers as well as their own in order to receive feedback from other students about how well their writing communicated. Among these, the Triad, a structured form of small group discussion involving role definition, was most effective in securing student involvement and on-task behavior in the group.

The Triad Process

In preparation for the Triad, students bring to class copies of a first draft paper, form groups of three, and exchange papers. They are given the task of taking these papers home, reading them, and writing comments on them using guidelines which the teacher provides. When they return to the next class meeting, students join the original group of three and share perceptions about each other's papers in order to receive information which would be useful to them in producing a final paper. Students are given written instructions for the procedures.

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The session begins with each student taking the role of Reader, Writer, and Observe for the first round of the Triad. The students are given the following role descriptions:

ROLE DESCRIPTIONS FOR THE TRIAD: The purpose of these descriptions is to give you direction and guidance as you experience the Triad discussion. Remember that one of your major objectives is to respect and be sensitive to the members of the Triad.

As Reader you will:

1. Analyze thoroughly the Writer's paper, indicating strengths and weaknesses.
2. Implement ways of presenting useful information to the Writer in a humane fashion.
3. Support statements of information with specific examples.
4. Suggest ways of improving specific skills.
5. Suggest resources the Writer might use as an aid.
6. Determine from the Writer how useful the information is.

As Writer you will:

1. Develop questions about your paper which help the Reader analyze it.
2. Ask questions to make sure you understand the comments that are made.
3. Help the Reader clarify responses to the paper.
4. Manage the Reader as a resource in order to obtain useful information that you can use to finalize your paper.

As Observer you will:

1. Collect verbatim data of the interaction between the Writer and the Reader.
2. Relate interactions to the Writer and Reader.
3. Infer degree of usefulness of information to the Writer.
4. Assess the level of specificity of the information given by the Reader.
5. Summarize what skills, knowledge, or attitudes were the focus of the interaction.
6. Test out your perceptions by asking for feedback from the Writer and Reader.

Procedurally, the Reader and Writer interact verbally concerning the Writer's paper for ten minutes. During that time, the Observer writes

down process information conerning his/her observations of the interaction. After ten minutes is concluded, the Observer reports to the group. Process feedback given by the Observer is limited to five minutes. Then, the participants rotate roles and begin a second round of the Triad. The Triad is complete when each participant has acted as Reader, Writer, and Observer. Using the information they receive from peers in the Triad, students take their papers home, rewrite them in a final form, and submit them to the teacher the following class meeting. The Triad is run four times during a fifteen week semester.

Comparison of Triad with an Unstructured Group Procedure

The major structural difference between a Triad and a small group in which student papers are discussed is that in the Triad, participants assume specific predetermined roles. Although the Triad structure appeared to be the most effective in eliciting useful student feedback, the concern was very simple: Did it really make any difference whether or not student discussed their papers in structured groups? To pursue this question, the author designed a study involving dynamics of small groups. The author audio-taped the verbal interactions of six Triad groups during four sessions of the Triad and verbal interactions of five Small Groups during four discussion sessions. The Small Groups were also composed of three students each, who followed the same procedures as the Triads, but who were not assigned roles. Students were freshmen at the University of Pittsburgh, enrolled in two sections of general composition.

According to a category-time system of analysis of these audio-tapes, Small Groups exhibited less on-task behavior than did Triads. Triads spen

two percent of their time each session discussing topics unrelated to the task, i.e., small talk; the percentage of time Small Groups devoted to this category increased with each session by almost ten percent. In the last two sessions, Small Groups spent more time on unrelated topics (30%) than on any writing topic. There was also twice as much silence in the Small Groups than in the Triads during each session. The analysis strongly suggests that the structured roles facilitated more on-task responses of the Triad groups.

The audio-tapes also reflected that Triad members were able to successfully assume the roles of Reader and Writer. Frequently, however, the Observers assumed the role of Reader during the feedback periods. Since no instruction was given in process observation, this was not surprising. The student assessment of each session showed that Triad members saw the need to increase their skill in the various roles. They reflected a concern with "preparing more" for the Triad by locating specific examples with which to support their statements and by generating more specific suggestions to help the Writer improve his/her paper. Students became better Triad members with each session.

From an attitude survey given at the end of the fifteen week course, the majority of students in both the Triad and Small Group perceived discussing papers in a group as a useful and enjoyable experience. The quality of the interactions as indicated by the audio-tapes suggest, however, that Triad groups were more productive.

Discussion

From this study comparing structured Triad groups with unstructured

small group procedures, it seems that the Triad is a viable mode for the teaching of writing. Whether or not the Triad would be successful in writing classes depends to a large extent on the assumptions and values of both the teacher and the students.

For instance, this writer would devote class time to the study of process observation (not done in the study) because she values it as a relevant and useful concept to the student writer and Triad Observer. The process of writing reflects a response to a stimulus or phenomenon, observation of that phenomenon, systematic collection of information, and analysis and synthesis of the information resulting in a written product. The process observer uses these very skills to analyze the communication between people in a given situation. Skilled observation does not usually emerge naturally in groups or in student writers, but may help develop written and verbal communication.

Students' value systems also come into play in determining the success of the Triad. Some students often assume a passive stance toward learning. Placed in a structure such as the Triad can be uncomfortable to some because it violates a set which states that one learns from the teacher, writes for the teacher, and is evaluated by the teacher. At such times, peer pressure often comes to bear on students participating in the Triad. Regardless of their feelings, certain expectations intrinsic to the Triad structure have been placed on them. Often this peer pressure has a practical benefit. Students in the Triad, for example, are conscientious in preparing their first draft papers, in reading and marking papers in preparation for the Triad session, and in attendance. Disapproval for being unprepared or absent will come from peers in the Triad whom the

recalcitrant student has "let down."

Most students, however, welcome the opportunity to have some input into their own learning. In this respect, the Triad structure is non-threatening since Triad papers are first drafts. (Students submit final papers to the instructor after they have rewritten them, using feedback from their Triad group.) Students tend to develop a commitment to each other, are comfortable with having other students read and comment on their papers, and show signs of seeing themselves as resources.

Another assumption some writing teacher and students hold, especially in a general composition class, is that students are not capable of giving accurate information about another person's paper. Both the National Council of the Teachers of English and the Anglo-American Conference at Dartmouth suggest that the practice of having students read each other's papers should be used as a source of practical instruction. "At the least, such a device can lead to superficial improvements in usage and mechanics; at best it contributes to an overall development of style." (NCTE, National Study, 1961, p. 135) The usefulness of multiple responses to a paper, Moffett suggests, far outweighs the degree of sophistication of those responses. (Moffett, 1968) One of the reasons students may have difficulty is that in the writing class, teacher comments on a paper are typically considered by many students and most teachers as the major source of instruction. However, that instruction looks forward to developing skills in the next paper, not the one under scrutiny. The Triad, on the other hand, is viewed as an instructional mode because comments and suggestions are incorporated into the finalization of the Triad paper. Teachers

implementing the Triad may need to rethink their own attitudes about writing instruction since these attitudes can encourage or discourage the student's view of himself/herself as capable in dealing with other papers.

The Triad, then, operates out of premises which advocate student-centered learning and involves, not only the sharing of papers and ideas by students, but also the sharing of responsibility and commitment about learning by both the students and teacher. As a technique, the Triad shows promise for facilitating the development of that most important language skill, communication by writing.

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